

books

WALLS: RESISTING THE THIRD REICH — ONE WOMAN'S STORY

By HILTGUNT ZASSENHAUS
Beacon Press, \$7.95.

Readers interested in the history of World War II will certainly find this book rewarding. During the nearly three decades that have passed since Adolf Hitler and Eva Braun bade a grim farewell to the Fatherland, many volumes have appeared to document and decry the horrors of Nazism. Most, however, have been either extensive and formal histories, reminiscences of concentration camp victims, memoirs of high-ranking officials, or psychoanalytic examinations of the Führer.

Generally neglected in this plethora of material has been a worthwhile description of the average non-party member, non-Jewish German citizen's life during the years of euphoria and catastrophe from the rise of Hitler to the fall of the Third Reich. Many assume that the typical loyal Germans went along with their leaders, like sheep or lemmings, and this is true to a large extent. But it is no trademark of Germany, 1933-1945, that civilian populations generally allow their governments to get away with murder, lie to them, and intimidate them into silence with a variety of consequences. By isolating society as a whole into fragments of conflicting self-interests, the skillful and cynical establishment can build walls between its inhuman desires and the human desire of one oppressed person to help another. Because Hitler was so successful at sep-

arating people into fearful and apathetic groups too small to accomplish change, daily life in Nazi Germany was a continuous hell of paranoia for even loyal citizens.

Hiltgunt Margret Zassenhaus, a naturalized American citizen and Baltimore physician since 1952, lived such a tightrope existence and in "Walls" describes it with the verve and skill of an accomplished novelist. Beginning her story in a direct and simple manner, she manages to hold the reader to the very end. "One morning in winter I awoke, and I could see no sky through my window. The room had a dim, yellowish, almost sulfur-like light. The window glass was covered with thick yellow paper, printed over and over with swastikas. Overnight our house had been dimmed by Nazi hands. This was in Hamburg, Germany, January 30, 1933. Adolf Hitler had come to power."

Neither a Nazi nor a Jew, young Hiltgunt Zassenhaus was raised in a liberal German family by a father deeply influenced by the humanity of Albert Schweitzer and a mother whose optimistic motto was "Let us answer the evil with good." Yet such was the all-pervasive strength of Nazism that organized resistance was nearly impossible. Despite the dangers, however, some Germans did find ways of working against the programs and pogroms of Hitler.

The author of "Walls" was one such resistance worker. She did not destroy bridges or operate an underground railroad for escaped prisoners, as the book's subtitle seems to imply. Instead, she used her position as Scandinavian interpreter in the German Department of Justice to smuggle food, medicine, and — most important — hope to political prisoners throughout Germany. Her efforts eventually led to secret cooperation from the Swedish Red Cross and, near the end of the war, to the prevention of the mass execution of the more than 1,000 prisoners in her charge. So effective was the author's work that after the war she received medals of knighthood from Norway, Denmark, and Germany.

Because she has succeeded in capturing the human side of a dozen years that were so perilous to both her and the rest of the world, Dr. Zassenhaus has written a book that is interesting on several levels. It is first an autobiography of one girl's growing to

maturity; it is secondly a horrifyingly vivid document of a people somehow surviving the terror of high-concentration bombing. ("Children were being pulled along, tripping and stumbling over their own short legs. The men carried bulging suitcases held together with paper string. Some sat on the curb to pull the shoes off swollen, aching feet. Others simply lay down in the middle of the road, staring vacantly up at the smoke-filled sky. No one cried or complained. The faces were dark and empty, as if life had gone out . . . I walked on, my shoes covered by a heavy layer of red dust. My throat was burning and it hurt to swallow. The smoke was getting thicker, and tears ran down my cheeks. I tried to take a shortcut down a sidestreet but heard someone yell, 'The street is afire!' Quickly I jumped aside into a doorway. A few feet away a small blue flame skipped along the asphalt. It moved rapidly, then exploded. Phosphorus. A woman hurled herself into the moving mass of people. 'My shoes! My shoes are burning!' she cried hysterically. Small blue flames were licking the soles of her shoes. She disappeared among the crowd as they moved along. Everyone was on the run.") Finally, "Walls" is a vehicle for Dr. Zassenhaus' personal philosophy: "Hitler's Germany happened many years ago, but it could happen today. Again we are living in a world torn by some of the same forces that either activated or paralyzed the German people. We must identify with them in their bewildered confusion, for although Hitler is dead, he is still alive. He will live on as long as the walls remain . . ."

Sensitive readers who prefer an author's "message" to be illustrated in a subtle manner or stated once and then dropped may be somewhat annoyed by Dr. Zassenhaus' reaffirmation of her theme, which appears with and without variations throughout the book, almost as if the author wanted to be certain no one forgets. This insistence on underlining mars "Walls," but only to a minor degree. Otherwise, it is a fascinating and extremely well-written description of the human side of World War II. — GAG ■

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Since this review was written, the Norwegian Parliament has nominated Dr. Zassenhaus as a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize.]